



The technical is political

Understanding the political implications of sector characteristics for the delivery of sanitation services

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Key messages

- The characteristics of service delivery sectors have political and technical implications. These characteristics, relating to market, task and demand as well as the type of good produced, can be applied to sanitation services in order to explore and respond to some of the problems of individual and collective action that affect the sector.
- The implications of these characteristics differ depending on the subtype of sanitation involved, for instance whether the context is urban, rural or peri-urban and what the mechanisms are for the containment, removal, treatment and disposal or reuse of faecal waste.
- Applied to specific sanitation subtypes from an understanding of the wider context, the characteristics provide a broad analytical framework that can help governance and sector specialists go beyond technical design approaches to understand and unlock the underlying incentives for different actors.

1 Introduction

This brief is the third in a series exploring the interplay between the technical and political in relation to specific sectors, in this case sanitation. It examines the politics and governance of sanitation through a technical, ‘sector characteristics’ lens. The way in which the characteristics of sectors influence the politics of service provision is complex and multifaceted, and to date there has been little systematic comparison of sectors using a unified analytical framework. Mcloughlin with Batley (2012) identify an initial set of four types of characteristic¹ that influence the politics of service delivery:

- *Nature of the good being produced:* Can the market deliver the service or does it require public provision?
- *Market failure characteristics:* What sorts of market failure arise that could justify public intervention?
- *Task-related characteristics:* How does the way a service is produced and delivered affect relationships of control and accountability?
- *Demand characteristics:* How does the nature of the service provided affect the form of user demand and provider control?

These characteristics can affect the incentives, accountability and power of politicians, managers, professionals, providers and users of services. Drawing on the findings from a consultation with sanitation specialists² and recent literature, we explore below how such an approach could help us to understand and respond to some of the persistent problems undermining the achievement of universal access to sanitation.³

Sanitation comprises a very broad range of services and service delivery functions. This paper focuses on the safe containment, removal, treatment and disposal or reuse of human excreta, a process which we refer to as the sanitation ‘chain’. We exclude functions such as solid-waste management and urban drainage. This still, however, leaves a huge diversity of service delivery subtypes or subsectors. Each can have very different configurations of responsibilities and expectations among users, front-line service providers and those tasked with regulating or managing services.

Urban sanitation services may be delivered through centralised sewerage, more localised or decentralised sewerage or latrines and septic tanks from which waste should be periodically emptied and treated before disposal or reuse, which is the case in the majority of developing

¹ The set developed by Mcloughlin with Batley (2012) refers to ‘technical characteristics’. A finding from our consultation was that this terminology may be more useful to a governance audience than to sanitation specialists. The characteristics are technical insofar as they originate in different fields of social and political science and relate to the configurations of actors and assets for specific service delivery tasks. For sanitation specialists, however, the term ‘technical’ might allude to specific disciplinary domains – for example civil engineering or epidemiology. Consequently ‘sector characteristic’ is the preferred term in this brief.

² The consultation was held at the offices of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in London in December 2013. Participants were drawn from a variety of backgrounds, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), consulting organisations and academic institutions. The paper also benefited substantially from the comments of an external reviewer, though all errors and opinions are the authors’.

³ Deliberations on how sanitation might be included in the post-2015 development agenda have highlighted some of the major preoccupations for the sector, including (i) elimination of open defecation and universal access to sanitation at home, in health centres and in schools; (ii) progressive improvement in service sustainability; and (iii) tackling inequalities (see, e.g., JMP, 2013).

countries. Consequently, in the urban context, sanitation responsibilities extend beyond providing access to toilets or latrines, to the subsequent safe management of that waste while it can cause harm to people or environment. Rural sanitation in developing countries tends to be characterised by on-site latrines. There is not as much emphasis on subsequent management of excreta once it is safely confined, because waste can be left or treated organically insitu. Many of the challenges of incentivising collective action for household latrine provision vary according to population density, which includes a range of forms of settlement not limited to the simplistic categories of urban and rural.

A further important variation is how far public or private actors are expected to provide and/or meet the costs of services. The extent to which private households are involved in sanitation service provision challenges the clear distinctions between service providers and service users that can be made more easily in other sectors such as health, education and drinking water supply.

Throughout this brief we refer to a wide range of different sanitation services in a range of different contexts. We seek to introduce the concepts in a way which allows both sanitation and governance specialists to consider the interaction and overlap between the technical and the political. We argue that such an understanding is necessary in order to respond to some of the most intractable problems in equitable and sustainable service delivery. We do not discuss all of the characteristics identified in the original framework (McCloughlin with Batley 2012). The aim is to present a subset of characteristics in enough detail to explore their relevance to different sanitation subtypes rather than to itemise them in a procedural way. The framework and the observations we make, moreover, are not intended to be final, and we attempt to show where other thinking, or broader contextual understanding, can add further understanding alongside a 'characteristics lens'. For a general and more systematic presentation of the framework in relation to a range of service sectors, see Harris, McCloughlin and Wild, 2013.

2 Sector characteristics and the political challenges of inclusive delivery

2.1 Economic logic and an understanding of social norms can help to understand the incentives for households to take action on sanitation

In recent decades, the sanitation sector of many developing countries has undergone a broad policy shift, particularly in the case of rural sanitation. Broadly, this can be summarised as a shift from a supply-driven model to a demand-driven model: under the supply-driven model, subsidies or hardware are provided to households to build sanitation facilities; under the demand-driven model, little or no subsidy is given to households, and intensive promotional activities are employed to motivate households to construct latrines. This activity is ideally accompanied by market development to stimulate private supply of sanitation goods and services (Cairncross, 1991). Another way to look at this shift is the broad withdrawal of the public sector from a role as service provider (at least for the first part of the sanitation chain, relating to the ‘confinement’ of faecal waste), to a role as facilitator of services, with provision, in effect, met by the private sector, which includes households as well as businesses.

Arguments about public versus private goods, which originated in classical economic theory, have played a role in this policy shift. The characteristics pertaining to the public good that are included in the first of McLoughlin with Batley’s four types of sector characteristics (nature of the good), are low **rivalry** and low **excludability**. In the case of sanitation, it is arguable that a household toilet is a private good: it is excludable, as you can prevent other people from using it; and rivalrous, in that it cannot be used by more than one person at once and, for on-site forms of sanitation, there is finite capacity. Yet it can also be argued that for everyone to have a toilet (and manage their waste), i.e. to maintain an excreta-free environment, is a public good: it has low excludability, as it is not possible to privatise or charge for the health benefits, and low rivalry, as one person’s enjoyment of the health benefits doesn’t prevent others from enjoying the same. The distinction between the private good of the latrine and the public good of the excreta-free environment still allows for public support for aspects of sanitation, such as promotion of hygienic behaviour; sanitation marketing, for example training and business development for manufacturers of latrine slabs; and subsidising or providing those aspects of faecal waste management that extend beyond the household, such as transporting and treating sludge or wastewater (particularly in urban areas). As discussed in further detail below, an area of greater contention is how far public support in the form of subsidies should be retained to help the poorest members of a community if they are otherwise unable to afford a safe facility.

A similar policy position is justified by interpreting aspects of sanitation as merit goods – those for which significant **positive externalities** exist, or for which service users are likely to significantly underestimate the private and external benefits (imperfect information). By this logic a market failure should be corrected by public intervention, for example by promoting sanitation to catalyse demand.⁴

But while the economic logic of rivalry, excludability or externalities has tended to reinforce high-level normative and policy shifts in the sanitation sector in recent decades, the terminology is not always used explicitly. Policies may, moreover, leave room for flexibility. Ethiopia's National Hygiene and Sanitation Strategy (2005), for example, states that 'subsidy should only be applied if it is sustainable to the point where all needs are met' (Government of Ethiopia Ministry of Health, 2005). The emphasis is on leveraging sustainable and universal access. Subsidies may in some contexts discourage this, but they are not prohibited entirely. There may be good reason to look beyond a narrow technical interpretation of characteristics derived from economics, such as the level of externality, rivalry and excludability associated with the service. This section and the next attempt to do so, respectively, for the particular problems of leveraging collective and individual action among sanitation users and avoiding inappropriate incentives when encouraging elites to take a leadership role.

For households and communities, it is important to interpret the incentives associated with rivalry and excludability alongside contextual factors relating to social norms, particularly those associated with the potential for collective action. Two observations point the way.

The first is that in practice, arguments predicated on both public (or merit) *and* private good definitions appear to have their place in motivating sanitation behaviour change at household level. In a study of the approach that evolved into Community Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) in Bangladesh, a largely 'private' consideration, prestige, was found to be the most important motivator for latrine adoption (Allan, 2003). In a study in Amhara, Ethiopia, women with young children were also found to cite benefits more associated with the private good, such as feelings of convenience and security. However, factors associated with the public good, even if experienced individually, were also commonly cited as motivators, such as being free of the shame of contaminating the environment and disease prevention (Hernandez et al., 2009).

The second observation is that approaches like CLTS aim to reinforce the connection between the private good (individual households' latrine adoption) and the public good (the excreta-free environment, secured when all households adopt latrines) by expressly mobilising the whole community to achieve 'open, defecation-free' status. In so doing, reassurance is offered to individual households that public good benefits (clean environment, good health) would not be jeopardised by non-adopters.⁵

How does this help us to achieve the public health benefits of sanitation when we look at the incentive problems which must be overcome at individual and collective level? First, it suggests that households can indeed be motivated by private benefits to adopt the private good (the latrine). But health benefits are not necessarily the first place to start: convenience, security and personal dignity may be more effective entry-points. The causal links between sanitation and health are often harder to explain, and households may not be aware that health could be jeopardised by those who persist with open defecation. Second, and following from this latter point, public good arguments focusing on health and pollution at the level of the community also have their place. But these can be reinforced by making

⁴ The sector characteristics framework identifies merit and the level of positive externality as a separate group of 'market failure' characteristics. While these are similar conceptually to the group of characteristics relating to the nature of the good (rivalry and excludability), they may have different implications in other sectors. In sanitation, their political, and technical, implications are sufficiently similar that we discuss them together.

⁵ This is somewhat, though not entirely, analogous to a free rider problem

clear that non-adoption will not be tolerated. Establishing a social norm in this way reinforces for households that private, as well as public, health benefits will result from the private cost of building a latrine. Of course, whether this will succeed depends in turn on how visible non-adoption is. But, in general, while open defecation may tend to be an activity that is not witnessed by others, the journey of non-adopters out of the village is harder to conceal and could be collectively ‘policed’. Ultimately, the practical implication is that sanitation programmes need to adapt promotion messages to the social norms at play in a given context. Wherever resources permit, this should be founded on context-specific research and appropriate pretesting of communication strategies, but a good starting point is to consider how public and private motivations operate, interrelate and can be shaped.

A nuanced understanding of social norms and politics can also be of help in deciding whether to offer subsidies to the poorest community members to help them construct latrines. If an excreta-free environment is viewed as a public good, it could justify public intervention to support households that are genuinely unable to pay. But proponents of a zero-subsidy approach could also argue that even if they were targeted to the poor, any subsidies would disrupt incipient collective action by reducing the sense of ‘all being in it together’. Interpreting characteristics such as excludability and rivalry alongside the social norms and informal institutions at work can again help to navigate the apparent contradiction. Before imposing a blanket approach to subsidies in a national sanitation policy, for example, it may be necessary to understand the extent to which customs affect the acceptability of special support for poorer members of society, and whether people view equity in inputs (i.e. equal subsidies) or in outcomes (i.e. all households have access to sanitation) as more important. It also requires an empirical understanding of whether households expectations for subsidies have been conditioned by other programmes in the past, or those ongoing in neighbouring areas. The need to set the interplay of technical and political factors in their wider context is a point returned to in the Conclusion.

2.2 Care is needed when altering incentive structures to encourage elites to take action on sanitation

Elites are often blamed for limited progress on sanitation (invariably with generic laments for lack of ‘political will’), but digging deeper into technical sector characteristics can help us to understand their incentives for supporting and providing sanitation services. Again, however, the understanding offered by characteristics rooted in economic theory, such as excludability and externalities, takes us only so far. If the technical arguments for focusing subsidies on the public good of the excreta-free environment rather than the private good of household latrines are convincing, it has been a conundrum for sanitation specialists that these arguments have not always convinced elites. There is, then, a need to consider how other characteristics of a service can operate alongside, or in contradiction to, arguments of public, private and merit good.

The evolution of a particular large-scale promotion-oriented approach, India’s Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC), provides an interesting case study, suggesting that care must be taken when seeking to alter the incentives for elite action on sanitation if it is to result in sustainable outcomes for communities.

A plausible explanation for political reluctance to move to promotion-based approaches is that politicians prefer subsidised programmes because they offer greater **visibility** and **attributability** of the benefits associated with the service. Visibility and attributability are two of the task-related characteristics identified by Mcloughlin with Batley (2012), which relate to the way in which the service is produced. Where the service itself, or the benefits from it, are highly visible to clients and can be attributed to a specific provider, it might be expected to increase the political incentives for provision. A promotional campaign based on self-empowerment and collective action by communities, however, provides less in the way of visible benefits extended from the service provider or sponsor to the service user. In

analysing the genesis and evolution of the Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC) in India, WSP (2011) has suggested that progress was initially slow because it denied political actors the chance to obtain visible and attributable credit from service users. Many states were reluctant to implement a programme that excluded subsidies for those above the poverty line, and thus removed a flow of resources from patrons to their clients.

In 2003, the TSC introduced a system of *ex-post* incentives called the *Nirmal Gram Puraskar* (NGP), which essentially provides prizes for communities achieving open defecation-free status. The NGP prizes, nominally routed to local leaders for village improvement projects, are credited by WSP (2011) as being a key driver for the programme. Spears (2012) argues that the prizes increased the achievement of open defecation-free status, and that the incentive effect marginally increased along with the ‘stepped’ nature of the prize, which is tiered according to community size. On a straightforward interpretation, the effect might be assumed to work partly by incentivising collective action among households (by providing additional, community-level benefits) and partly by re-establishing a visible benefit, distributed by elites to their communities.

Whether the NGP works in this way, and indeed whether it has actually been effective, would then depend on how far elites genuinely direct the prizes to their communities and whether they are able to turn the system to their own advantage. This relates to another sector characteristic, the **measurability** of service outputs and outcomes. Results of the TSC reported by the government (based on receipts for post-hoc payment of construction costs) were brought into question by the 2011 census, which showed 31% sanitation coverage, or less than half the 68% according to official reports (Hueso and Bell 2013). The divergent picture of TSC outcomes suggests that the government has struggled to accurately verify levels of latrine construction and open defecation-free status reported by village level officials. Accurately measuring the numbers of latrines built across a community is arguably an easier task than verifying the end outcomes of improved health, or even less tangible benefits like convenience and prestige. But on a national-level programme in a country the size of India, measurement is still a significant challenge. Based on this discrepancy in the data, the challenges around sanitation’s measurability appear to leave room for elites to capture NGP prizes without actually achieving an increase in sanitation in their communities. The overall lesson is then that in playing with elite incentives, effort must be made to ensure that rewards cannot be solely captured privately, but rather must result in public benefit. As Spears (2012) acknowledges, investing sufficiently in robust processes of monitoring and verification, as well as the incentives themselves, would be a sensible place to start.⁶

2.3 Considering the visibility of failure is important when devising incentives for sanitation

When considering incentives for political action, the visibility and attributability of failure is also important --- arguably more so in the case of sanitation than for other basic services. This is because in sanitation, success is largely experienced as an *absence* of water-related disease or pollution. There are at least two implications that follow from this.

Firstly, failures are a constant feature of the landscape (faeces in the environment, recurrent diarrhoeal disease, polluted waterways) which creates a level of familiarity or acceptance that undermines political action. Floods, which bring sludge and wastewater above ground, out of pipes, septic tanks and latrine pits, provide episodic spikes in the visibility of chronic,

⁶ Analysis of the TSC does not suggest that political actors are motivated *only* by private benefits. For example, WSP’s analysis of the progress apparently made by Maharashtra State suggests that political actors and officials were also motivated by traditions of social movements in the State.

low-level sanitation failure – as do epidemics of water-related diseases like cholera. In theory, these can provide pivotal windows of opportunity for advocacy and mobilisation, with higher levels of awareness and demand. But the political challenge for proponents of sanitation is to get the issue into the public and political conscience before such a crisis strikes. Interest has recently grown in the use of commercial and social marketing techniques as a way to achieve this. A common feature is the use of market or formative research to inform a strategy of stimulating awareness and desire on the demand side, and the incentives and capacity for provision on the supply side (See Box). Although these approaches are still relatively novel they offer the potential to go far beyond one-off advocacy campaigns that provide a spike in visibility for the sanitation issue.

Box 1: Social marketing to sustain both demand and supply in Indonesia's sanitation sector

In-depth market research was a key part of WSP's approach to sanitation marketing in East Java, Indonesia -- part of its Global Scaling Up Sanitation Project. This revealed a number of bottlenecks and drivers to sanitation behaviour change, ranging from misperceptions about the cost of latrines to limited accessibility of sanitation products, to the importance of social status in motivating sanitation adopters. Following research, a creative behaviour change communication strategy was developed with a range of mass communication tools (radio programmes, video dramas, school plays, posters and games) to support districts in promoting sanitation to the public. At the same time, on the supply side, sanitation artisans and entrepreneurs were supported to develop products that responded to consumer need and to promote them accordingly.

Source: Devine, 2010

Secondly, visibility of sanitation failure may not provoke action where elites are insulated or even subsidised, thanks to another sector characteristic – **territoriality** (the extent to which services tend to be provided to geographically defined groups). In urban areas, sewerage is ostensibly the most territorial form of sanitation, since access is strictly defined by the physical boundaries of the network. Although sewerage in many developing countries is severely undermaintained, it can nonetheless partially isolate wealthier elites from the levels of visible sanitation failure which occur in less well-off areas. The worst maintained components of many sewerage networks in developing cities are at the treatment end, if treatment facilities exist at all. This means that even in failing sewerage systems, faecal waste from wealthy areas can remain largely invisible until raw sewage is emptied into watercourses and open drains. Often this is at some distance from the households from which it originates, and in marginal areas of the city in which poor people are forced to live, such as informal settlements that cluster along Kathmandu's Bagmati River. The inequity is exacerbated when operation of sewerage is subsidised from water bills. Because the water network frequently extends ahead of the sewerage network, a larger, and on average, poorer, group of water users subsidise the smaller and wealthier group of sewerage users. Where these territorial distinctions are breached – as perhaps most famously in London's 1858 'Great Stink' – there may be greater potential for elites to appreciate that they are affected by inadequate sanitation of poorer citizens. The alternative is direct action to bring sanitation inequities to the attention of elites and government. More recently, residents of Cape Town's informal settlements have protested the lack of sanitation and poor housing standards by dumping human faeces on the steps of local government offices (BBC, 2013), though the longer-term efficacy of this tactic has yet to be seen.

2.4 The physical and temporal patterns of service use have important implications for the potential for collective action on the demand side

In services such as education, health and water supply, opportunities for interaction among users have important implications for how far they are able to collectively mobilise – both to demand, and subsequently to be involved in providing, services. Contrasting a rural community water point with a rural healthcare facility, the former may be used more frequently and more predictably – people demand water daily and the order of domestic and livelihood tasks means that those who collect water (often women or children) will come together at similar times of the day. Demand from healthcare users, meanwhile, arises more sporadically and at times of acute need, leaving less room to socialise as the service is accessed. Patients tend to confront front-line service providers as individuals, and the diversity of their needs makes it harder to find common cause with other users. Rural water points may also have a smaller geographical catchment than healthcare facilities, i.e. they have greater territoriality (because users' ability to travel to the water point is limited by the frequency with which they need water, and the additional waterload on the return journey). The combination of these factors – greater **frequency**, **predictability** and **territoriality** of demand (examples of 'demand characteristics') –implies greater scope for collective action among users of rural water points compared to rural healthcare users. A visible effect of this, as well as the relative complexity of the service, is the greater reliance on users to operate and manage rural water services.

In the case of sanitation, territoriality, frequency and predictability of demand might at first glance be expected to be similar to water supply, and give similar scope for collective action, at least in rural areas. The frequency and predictability with which people need to defecate is obvious, and, consequently, regular encounters among users might be expected as they enter inadequate facilities, or walk to find a place for open defecation, leading to opportunities to discuss and articulate a demand for better services. But in the case of sanitation, social norms around the activity make it much less likely that users will spontaneously discuss their common needs. As one contributor to our consultation noted: 'Standing in line with your jerry can is very different to squatting in the bush hoping your neighbours won't see you'. While there is continued debate about the ethics and efficacy of using shame and disgust-based 'triggers' in sanitation promotion, what is common to these approaches is that they attempt to remind people of the implications of an everyday activity that would otherwise remain unspoken, i.e. they get people to discuss defecation openly.

Territoriality represents a more challenging concept for sanitation in peri-urban areas and informal settlements. The challenge of bringing CLTS-type approaches to such areas has exercised sanitation specialists for many years. Denser, larger settlements, with unclear boundaries and more transient populations, make geographically bounded concepts of community less tenable. The uncertain legal status of many peri-urban settlements disincentivises landlords and householders from investing in a latrine, while providing municipal authorities with the excuse to overlook these communities. Community mobilisation approaches have nonetheless been shown to be viable in some peri-urban areas. Participatory mapping – a visual reminder of territoriality – can be a useful vehicle to encourage community members to self-identify and bring to light the full inadequacy of sanitation in an urban area. Use of mapping by the Orangi Pilot Project Research and Training Institute, an NGO based in Karachi, Pakistan, has been instrumental in its bottom-up approach to urban sanitation. In this case, the mapping has also brought existing efforts of the community to develop sanitation solutions to the attention of authorities, helping them to engage on a more equal basis. The box below details the experience of Homeless International and partners in leveraging collective action around sanitation in peri-urban settlements in Malawi, Zimbabwe and Tanzania, suggesting that mapping alongside other empowerment efforts can be an entry-point for bargaining on wider urban upgrading (Welle, 2006).

Box 2: Leveraging collective action on sanitation and more in informal settlements

A project led by Homeless International in peri-urban communities in Malawi, Zimbabwe and Tanzania suggests that citizens' common experiences of land and place (i.e. territoriality) in peri-urban areas has an important role to play – not only for collective action to demand sanitation, but to negotiate on wider issues of land access and services. Homeless International's partners begin by facilitating community-led surveys. This permits community members to self-identify with each other and with the community 'territory' and, critically, provides the basic topographical information which technical specialists need in order to plan sanitation. In Zimbabwe, the surveys have been an important bargaining tool to allow a federation of community-level savings groups to convince the local authority to allocate land and invest in sanitation facilities. In Tanzania, Homeless International's partner, Centre for Community Initiatives, has utilised demonstration sanitation projects as an entry point to bargaining with local officials on wider house and infrastructure upgrading in the Chang'ombe settlement, Dodoma.

Source: Homeless International, 2011

2.5 ... and the potential for market-based approaches to supply

Predictability and frequency of demand for sanitation would on first sight appear to be instrumental to the viability of approaches to provision that have a regular market interaction, for example pay-per-use communal facilities. But these are in many respects the bare minimum of the business opportunities offered by the frequency and predictability of need (and potentially demand) for sanitation. Attention is now turning to evolution of urban service delivery business models that offer revenue opportunities from provision of sanitation facilities, through to resource recovery, as seen in Sanergy's approach in Kenya (See Box).

Box 3: Sanergy seeks to align the business incentives for sanitation in urban Kenya

Sanergy's approach to the enormous challenges of sanitation in Kenya's informal settlements relies on business motivators at a number of levels: the revenue opportunities at different points in the urban sanitation 'chain', from containment to reuse. A standardised 'Fresh Life Toilet' is offered to local entrepreneurs who become franchise partners, managing their facilities on a pay-per-use basis. Waste is collected by trained and equipped staff, who collect waste stored in cartridges and take it to a centralised recycling facility by wheelbarrows, which can navigate the narrow and unplanned streets. Here it is treated through composting according to WHO standards and sold to a number of Kenyan organic farms.

Source: Sanergy, 2013

3 Conclusion

The structured approach used in this paper is offered as one lens among several that can be applied when looking at service delivery bottlenecks.

The discussion has touched on a small and selective sample of key debates in the sector, particularly the relative responsibilities of different actors and questions of how to incentivise action by these different actors. While we have started with nominally technical sector characteristics, the aim has not been to provide a blueprint for designing policies or programmatic approaches. Rather, we have attempted to use a selection of the sector characteristics as a structured entry-point to explore incentives, constraints and opportunities that are primarily political in nature and consequently very difficult to design for in a prescriptive way. In so doing, we have also sought to acknowledge where the framework may need to be nuanced with an understanding of the broader institutional context within which services are delivered (e.g. the rules of political competition, which cultural norms are active, etc.), which are not intrinsic to one sector or another.

Despite this limitation, we have sought to show how the framework offers a route to finding practical responses even if it does not predetermine them: using the visibility of failure, as well as success, to increase the incentives for public officials to support sanitation; tapping into households' perceptions of positive externalities and private benefits to inform sanitation promotion strategies; enhancing a sense of territoriality in peri-urban areas through community mapping and regularisation of tenure as a precursor to collective action. We have also sought to show that the four categories of sector characteristics do not operate in isolation – for example in considering how territoriality (a 'demand characteristic') can interact with visibility (a 'task-related characteristic') in the case of sewerage.

In applying the sector characteristics to sanitation, we have attempted to offer examples which may help sector specialists to understand the underlying political dynamics which inhibit progress, from policy level down to the design of specific programmes and projects. But our consultations also suggest that sector specialists are often aware of these underlying dynamics, even if they do not describe them using the terminology of the framework. We therefore hope that this paper, placed alongside others in the series, will also be of use to governance specialists seeking to understand differentiated policies, approaches and outcomes across a number of service delivery sectors.

Finally, we reiterate that our analysis does not cover all the characteristics identified in the original paper by McLoughlin with Batley (2012). A process of development and adaptation is inevitable, as specialists in different disciplines engage with the material and the ideas are applied in new contexts. Feedback on the utility of the approach and how it can be refined will be crucial and is most welcome.

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